



Walnut bookcases/room dividers made by Kent circa 1991. (Photo: Sander Studio.)

We had a few friends, but none lived very close by. I was feeling desperate for intellectual stimulation. I visited the campus in Bloomington one day to ask about taking classes, then decided to sign up for one. I could take one class per semester without diverting much time away from work or breaking the bank. All it took was lecture number one in a course on religion, medicine and suffering to convince me I wanted more. I took classes in each summer session and, thanks to a scholarship, arranged to attend college full time.

Kent was adamant that I should cover the costs of college myself. I wouldn't have had it any other way; I've always been stubborn and independent. I applied for every scholarship, grant and teaching member of the pack, he joined in.

assistantship available and entered essays in every contest. By the time I graduated in 1993, I'd paid for it all, in large part because tuition was still far more affordable than it is today. I had also kept up with the demands of our business: design work, drawing, bookkeeping and helping Kent with installations.

Living in a wooded part of Brown County made Oscar easy to care for. All we had to do was open the door, and he could take himself up the hill for a quick run, or out to the ravine to do his business. Now that we had a real home, I went into full-on domestic mode in my spare time, building new cabinets with ash faces to replace the generic dark-stained oak ones the previous homeowners had bought from a building-supply store. We tore out the "butcher-block" laminate counters and installed white laminate with a solid ash edge (again, it was the '90s). While Kent was on a hiking trip out west I pulled out the same generic oak cabinets in the dressing area just off our bedroom and replaced them with a vanity designed after the circa-1815 counter at the Shaker Museum in Old Chatham, N.Y., pictured in June Sprigg's book "Shaker Design." I painted it pale blue, added a solid maple top and plumbed in my first sink, following the page of directions that came in the box with the faucet. I made flower beds in front of the house, digging compost and manure into the hard-packed clay while Oscar rolled in the grass and occasionally trotted off to investigate a rustling at the edge of the forest.

Oscar knew he was an integral member of our family. We made him hamburgers with a celebratory candle for his birthday every year and homemade Christmas crackers with Milk Bones inside for the holidays. We took him with us on trips to visit my family in Florida. We took him hiking. On the rare occasions when I joined Kent for a paddle, we put him with us in the canoe. I loved knowing that after so many years of living in small apartments where he had been cooped up alone all day while I was at work, he finally had the perfect home.

Our marriage, though, was less happy. I quickly became so consumed by my studies that Kent felt neglected. I gave him less and less attention as I devoted every available moment to reading and writing. Instead of really listening to his complaints and talking about what might make



Oscar with birthday hamburgers, circa 1989.

him feel less lonely, I told him to stop being needy. It didn't even occur to me at the time that my obsession with excelling in my studies was fueled by a deep-seated urge to prove my own worth.

I had already decided to go on to graduate school and applied for fellowships to fund that project when we got a commission for a large armoire in hard maple. I can't recall the exact dimensions, but this thing was big – around 42 inches wide and at least 6 feet tall, with a pair of massive doors. When delivery day arrived, we removed the doors and drove it to our clients' house. "I'm so happy you're delivering it, and not a moving company," said the wife. "I know you'll take more care with the wallpaper on the stairs."

Kent took the top position, with me below. I have always found it easier to bear weight from below than to be the one on top, leaning over a massive piece of furniture while walking backwards up a flight of stairs. The staircase had a couple of steps at the bottom, then a dogleg landing before the main flight. After we'd maneuvered the beast around the turn, I repositioned myself for the long haul; to push with my shoulders, I had to bend my head sharply to the left, which immediately felt like a bad idea. "Be careful of the wallpaper!" our client reminded us. I powered through. We re-hung the doors, adjusted the piece so it was level and left with a check.

About a week later I was giving Oscar a bath, something he reluctantly allowed me to do. It was late summer, 1993; my first semester of grad school had begun. I leaned over the tub, wrapped Oscar in a towel and lifted him out. I felt a *click* in my upper back but thought nothing of it and carried on with the rest of the day.

A burning ache developed in my upper right back, between my shoulder blade and spine. Over-the-counter painkillers took off the edge, but the pain was unrelenting. One night I awoke around 2 a.m. feeling as though a stick was wedged in my esophagus. It hurt like crazy, but more troubling to me was the thought that one of my ribs might somehow have become dislodged and was poking into my throat. (I have a vivid imagination. Anything can happen within the invisible recesses of the body.) I woke Kent up and said I needed to go to the hospital. "You can drive yourself," he replied. Not wanting to argue – time seemed of

the essence – I got up, dressed and headed to town. It was pitch-black out; I was driving myself to the emergency room in tears, terrified about what might have gone wrong in my body and hurt by Kent's unwillingness to go with me.

An X-ray showed no apparent injury to the ribs or spine, so the doctor prescribed a muscle relaxer and sent me home.

After my trip to the emergency room, things between Kent and me went downhill fast. We both felt neglected, hurt and angry. I started spending more time with my fellow students instead of with Kent; when I was home, I was reading or writing in the office. Sure, I did what I had to for our business and to care for Oscar. But my heart and mind were increasingly elsewhere. When Kent told me for the third time, "I hate you. I don't like you. I wish you'd leave," I rented a room in a shared house in Bloomington.

Did I really want to leave our marriage and our home? No. But I felt pushed too far – by both my own scholarly compulsion and the sense that things weren't going to get better if I stayed, considering how long we'd failed to address our problems adequately, despite some feeble tries. It takes a lot of power to break free of the pull exerted by the familiarity of home. I would have to be single-minded.

The ad for the house said "No Pets," but the existing renter was living there with her dog. She'd managed to keep Roxy a secret, concealed in her car or bedroom whenever the Realtor who managed the place stopped by. I thought I could do the same with Oscar, so I brought him to town with me one day. He was uneasy about the new location, with the new person and dog – no wonder, considering where we'd been living for the previous five years. At the age of 13, he didn't need a jarring change. I told Kent I was bringing him home.

For the next few months, I studied, wrote essays, made new friends, exercised and did my best to avoid crippling depression, which manifested itself all the same, through insomnia. "Oscar's having problems," Kent told me repeatedly. "We're going to have to do something." Specifically, he explained, he'd let Oscar out, only to have him not return. Kent had to go looking, sometimes for a long time, only to find Oscar splay-legged on the ground, unable to get up.

Every week I'd drive back home to take care of design jobs or book-keeping, filled with resentment. Why couldn't I pursue my own interests and stay in this marriage? Why couldn't we have different interests and appreciate each other as spouses who happened to be quite different people? Wasn't that the point of a relationship, to be with someone *other than* myself? Kent was a sensitive, intelligent man, an excellent craftsman and hilarious when he wanted to be. He had high aesthetic standards and a wide range of practical skills, was a serious reader, knowledgeable woodsman and adventurous cook. The first time I met his mother, she described him as the sweetest of her three children. My parents and sister, along with Oscar, loved him.

It would take a few years for me to fathom my part in our marriage's end, and at this point I accept that we were simply not well-suited.

In the meantime, there was nowhere I wanted to be less than our home. Seeing me at the door, Oscar would lift his head hopefully. I ignored him, focused on the work at hand and eager to leave as soon as possible – not because I loved him any less than I ever had, but because my being could not handle one more ounce of emotional load.

"We have to do something." Kent couldn't bring himself to say "We have to have Oscar put to sleep," let alone "We have to find another place for you to live so Oscar can live with you." I had already decided against asking Kent for money, other than enough to cover my health insurance premiums (which were very affordable, given our youth and general good health) and the \$325 a month rent for my apartment for one year. Beyond that, I lived on fellowships, teaching pay and the occasional paid furniture design work. I may have been legally entitled to half our assets, but I didn't want his money, so the possibility of moving to a new place didn't even occur to me – I could not have afforded to move again without financial help from him. He knew as well as I did that Oscar was living in the best-possible place; if he had really been worried about Oscar getting stranded in the woods, surely he could have spent 5 or 10 minutes three times a day walking him around the yard on a leash. Instead, Oscar now reverted to being "my" dog, and I would be the one on the record for calling the shots.